



Do graphic PSAs have you changing the channel or glued to the tube?

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A razor blade sitting in a blood-splattered bathroom sink. A bacteria-infested toilet seat that wouldn't be welcome in a gas station. Open lesions and gray, jagged teeth peeking out from behind chapped lips. These are images that have become hard to ignore in some parts of the United States.

But that's exactly what the creative team behind The Meth Project's public service announcements intended. Their graphic, hard-hitting campaign is meant to educate people about the dangers of using methamphetamine, an addictive drug that can severely alter a person's brain activity.

The fuzzy bear who politely asked us not to start forest fires has been replaced by the bruised and battered teenager prostituting herself for a hit of meth.

But Lenora Patterson says that shouldn't really be startling to anyone.

"The campaigns needed to change because the kids changed," said Patterson, an assistant principal at Riverwood International Charter School in Georgia, which is the most recent state to air The Meth Project ads.

"They need that shock value," she said. "Kids these days are different from kids back then. They're exposed to things earlier and so the content has to be more raw. But it has the same effect of deterring students or children as it did back then."

Paid-media campaigns such as The Meth Project pay for air time, allowing the ads to be more graphic than donated media, said Peggy Conlon, the president and CEO of Ad Council. It produces PSAs that are created pro bono by volunteer advertising agencies. However, she said, some media outlets will turn down an ad if it's causing viewers to change the channel, despite losing money.

"You run the danger, with really graphic depictions, of turning people off," Conlon said. "There needs to be a delicate balance."

The Meth Project ads portray young adults' transformations from first-time users to blown-out addicts, thriving on gore and shock-value. But they're trying to educate about the dangers of trying meth "just this once," which is what Nitsa Zuppas said they set out to do.

Zuppas is executive director of the Siebel Foundation, the organization that founded The Meth Project. She said the goal was to produce PSAs that mirrored the content their target audience -- teens and young adults -- is used to.

"They're used to consuming very loud and hard-hitting media," she said. "Sadly (meth) happens to be a drug with really scary consequences. We wanted to show (those consequences)."

Despite the graphic nature of the PSAs, they have appeared in prime-time slots in the eight states with which The Meth Project works. Montana was the first state to air the ads in 2005.

And though the commercials may not sit well with every viewer, they have certainly generated buzz, much like the gruesome PSA for texting and driving that aired in the United Kingdom in 2009, Conlon said.

The ad features a car carrying teenage girls. The driver, who was attempting to send a text message from behind the wheel, crashes and the scene that follows is graphic.

While graphic PSAs seem to strike a chord with viewers, Ad Council's Conlon said the subject matter and the target audience both dictate the tone the ad will take.

For example, Ad Council's "buzzed driving" campaign infuses gore with humor to get through to teens and young adults. They did so by explaining that driving buzzed is just as dangerous as driving drunk.

Then there's health care company GlaxoSmithKline's recent cervical cancer PSA that debuted during the Oscars in March. The ad pulls viewers in with the promise of a new perfume before flipping the switch.

"Maybe it's unfair to get your attention this way, but nothing's fair about cervical cancer," a voice-over says.

Are viewers so desensitized that they need fake fragrances and graphic images to get their attention?

MTV doesn't think so.

The network uses humor in their newest campaign Get Yourself Tested, or GYT, meant to get teens and young adults talking about sexually transmitted disease prevention.

"STDs are heavily stigmatized," said Jason Rzepka, vice president of MTV's public affairs department. "They're something people don't want to talk about ... We've seen from past efforts in sexual health that the humorous approach helps to break the barriers and make it something a little more acceptable."

In contrast to The Meth Project's approach, Rzepka said it was important to him that the PSAs not scare the audience, but empower them.

"The humorous approach acts as an ice breaker to make it easier to talk about the subject," he said, adding that humor is not always an appropriate medium to discuss difficult topics.